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RUEHLM/AMEMBASSY COLOMBO 0883  
RUEHDK/AMEMBASSY DAKAR 0345  
RUEHDBU/AMEMBASSY DUSHANBE 0904  
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 4619  
RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL 2910  
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C O N F I D E N T I A L TASHKENT 001200

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR SCA/CEN AND DRL

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TAGS: PHUM PGOV PREL SOCI UZ

SUBJECT: UZBEKISTAN: THREE POLITICAL PRISONERS RELEASED

REF: A. TASHKENT 550  
    1B. TASHKENT 167  
    1C. TASHKENT 1188

Classified By: POLOFF R. FITZMAURICE FOR REASONS 1.4 (B, D)

11. (C) Summary: On October 20, sources reported that three political prisoners in Uzbekistan have been recently released: human rights activist and opposition party member Dilmurod Mukhiddinov; human rights activist Mamarajab Nazarov; and independent journalist Jamshid Karimov, the nephew of President Karimov. The timing of their release suggests that the government is sending a positive signal to the West over the EU's decision on October 13 to ease sanctions against Uzbekistan. We believe that the continuation of efforts to engage the government may result in the release of other political prisoners, as well as eventually pave the way for more systematic human rights and political reform. At the same time, while we applaud the release of the three prisoners, we also plan to raise our concern with the MFA regarding the sentencing of journalist Salidjahon Abdurakhmanov to ten years' imprisonment on October 10 and the continuing trial against human rights activist Akzam Turgunov in Karakalpakstan. End summary.

ACTIVIST AND HRW CONFIRMS RELEASE OF MUKHIDDINOV

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12. (C) Andijon-based human rights activist Salidjahon Zaybiddinov reported that Birlik opposition party activist (and member of the Ezgulik human rights group) Dilmurod Mukhiddinov arrived at his home in the Marhamat district of Andijon province on October 19 after being released from prison colony 64/29. Zaybiddinov said he talked with Mukhiddinov by telephone and reported that he was in good health and spirits.

13. (SBU) On October 20, former Human Rights Watch (HRW) Tashkent office director Igor Vorontsov issued an email announcement regarding the release of the three political prisoners. He reported speaking directly by telephone with Mukhiddinov, who was released on October 17. Mukhiddinov

reportedly told HRW that he had been amnestied and that his sentence was entirely lifted and had not been commuted to a suspended sentence. While he was not forced to write any confession or pledge before his release, Mukhiddinov was reportedly warned not to talk with any foreigners or international organizations.

¶4. (SBU) Vorontsov also stated his belief that both Nazarov and Karimov had been released, but added that HRW had not been able so far to directly communicate with them. The release of the three activists was also reported on Radio Free Europe's Ozodlik website on October 20.

¶5. (C) In May, a lawyer hired by Ezgulik to represent Nazarov was told by a prison director that he would be amnestied later this year (ref A). Mukhiddinov was widely - but erroneously - reported as having been amnestied and released from prison in February 2008 (ref B).

VERDICT EXPECTED IN TRIAL OF HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVIST

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¶6. (C) Several human rights contacts reported to polooff that the verdict in the trial of human rights activist Akzam Turgunov was expected on October 20 in Karakalpakstan. On October 14, a court in Karakalpakstan announced that an investigation had determined that Turgunov's health did not suffer as a result of a police officer pouring boiling water on his back during pre-trial detention. Independent observers have rejected the court's claim that Turgunov was not tortured. Erk opposition party member Dilorom Ishakova reported seeing Turgunov's burns, which she described as extensive (ref C). She also shared her belief that Turgunov was tortured by the police officer in a failed attempt to elicit a confession from him (Comment: This view is widely shared by other independent observers and appears plausible to us. End comment.)

COMMENT

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¶7. (C) These are the first - and hopefully not the last - reports of political prisoners being released under the September 2008 amnesty. The timing of their release could be interpreted as a positive reaction by the government to the EU's decision on October 13 to eliminate a visa ban list against selected GOU officials. It also reflects continued efforts by the Embassy to raise the issue of political prisoners with the government (all three individuals were included on a list of political prisoners that the Embassy delivered to the government earlier this year.) As several other activists were either released or amnestied earlier this year after visits by high-ranking U.S. government and EU officials, we believe that the continuation of efforts at engagement may encourage the government to release other political prisoners, as well as to eventually undertake more systematic human rights and political reforms.

¶8. (C) While we applaud the government's release of the three political prisoners, we continue to be concerned over the sentencing of journalist Salidjahon Abdurakhmanov to ten years' imprisonment on October 10 and the continuing trial against Turgunov. We will raise our concern over both cases with the MFA. Our message will emphasize that that the way in which local Karakalpak authorities have handled both cases is hurting the reputation of Uzbekistan as a whole, which we believe may offer a face-saving way for the authorities in Tashkent to back down. We will also work with USOSCE to coordinate this message in Vienna.

NORLAND